

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

OXTON HOUSE

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Name:	OXTON HOUSE
County:	Devon
District:	Teignbridge (District Authority)
Parish:	Kenton
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.630550 Longitude: -3.5147544 National Grid Reference: SX 92964 82301 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001269 Date first listed: 02-Apr-1993

Details

A late C18 picturesque landscape developed by the Rev John Swete, the late C18 Devon diarist and traveller.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In the C16, Oxton belonged to Nicholas Hurst, who bequeathed it to his sister, the wife of William Martin. Following Martin's death, his widow married into the Courtenay family of Powderham Castle, Devon (qv). Oxton continued to be owned by members of the Martin family until 1767, when William Clifford Martin died childless, leaving the estate to his cousin, Nicholas Tripe, the vicar of Ashburton. Tripe allowed his son John (1752-1821) to occupy the property, which comprised a C16 manor house set in walled gardens (Gray and Rowe ii, 1997-9). Tripe took Holy Orders in 1775, serving as curate of Kenn, near Oxton, from 1775 to 1782, and in 1781 changed his name to Swete in order to benefit under the will of his cousin, Esther Swete of Train, Modbury, Devon. The same year, Swete was appointed a prebendary of Exeter cathedral, and began to rebuild the house at Oxton.

Work on the grounds followed over a period of more than ten years, at a cost of over £6000. Swete married Catherine Beaumont in 1784, and together with his neighbouring cleric Richard Polwhele and their respective wives, founded a literary and historical circle in Exeter. In 1793 Polwhele commented that the grounds at Oxton 'are laid out in a style that perfectly accords with the modern fashion in gardening... since it is founded on the principles of NATURE and TRUTH'.

Between 1789 and 1801 Swete undertook a series of tours through Devon and neighbouring counties, producing twenty volumes of diaries with over 600 watercolour illustrations of houses, antiquities and other features of picturesque interest, inspired by the Rev William Gilpin's *Observations*. The Rev Swete died at Oxton in 1821, and the following year (1822) the Lysons noted that 'Oxton is beautifully situated and the extensive pleasure grounds have been laid out with much taste'. The House was altered c 1830, and when in 1848 the estate was offered for sale, the particulars described 'lawns, parterres, shrubberies and park-like grounds... refreshed by rivulets and fishpools uniting below the House into a small lake'. Romantic walks and rides through the pleasure grounds and plantations were noted, and in the early C19 F W Stockdale described the woodlands at Oxton as 'remarkably picturesque'.

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Oxton was purchased in 1848 by William Studd, whose family continued to own the estate until 1918, when it was sold to the Earl of Listowel. From 1938 to 1966 Oxton was used as a girls' boarding school, and following its sale in 1966 the House was divided into apartments. Today (1999) the House and estate remain in divided private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Oxton estate lies c 2.5km west of the village of Kenton, to the north of the B3381 road which runs west from Starcross to Great Haldon. Immediately to the south of this road, and adjoining the Oxton estate, lies Mamhead Park (qv). The c 95ha site comprises some 2ha of formal gardens around the House, and 93ha of pleasure grounds, parkland and woodlands with picturesque walks and rides. To the south the site is bounded by the B3381 road, while to the north it adjoins a track which separates the site from Haydon Common to the north. The site borders onto agricultural land to the north-east, east and west, and occupies a sheltered, north-east-facing combe to the east of Great Haldon, which rises to c 400m some 3km west-north-west of Oxton House. The park rises to a ridge of high ground to the south-west of the House, and there are extensive views north-east from the pleasure grounds, parkland and woodland walks towards the Exe estuary, while from the formal gardens and lawns south of the House there are views south-east over the park.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Oxton House is approached from a minor road which leads west from Kenton to Mamhead, at a point c 2km west of Kenton. Kenton Lodge, also known as Spring Lodge (listed grade II), a mid C19 stuccoed and gabled cottage, stands to the south of the entrance which leads to the east or principal drive. A picturesquely ruined gothic arch erected by the Rev Swete in 1790 to the north of the lodge was demolished in the mid C20 leaving only traces (Puglsey 1994). Immediately south-west of the mid C19 lodge an existing quarry cut into the north-west-facing cliff was developed by Swete as a picturesque feature, with a gothic hermitage (listed grade II) cut into the quarry face. The hermitage comprises an arched entrance flanked by a small gothic window leading to an inner chamber with a stone bench with a pillow cut out of the rock. The quarry was formerly adjoined by a waterfall, and the stream into which it fell was given a greater importance by raising the height of the drive by several feet (ibid). The drive passes south-west for c 450m along the foot of the cliff to reach the White Bridge (listed grade II*) c 150m east of the House. Constructed c 1830 and contemporary with the remodelling of Oxton House, the single-span cast-iron bridge, stamped 'J Vickary Exeter', is of beam construction and carries the drive north-west across the stream which flows through the valley. The ornate cast-iron balustrades are fixed to paired cast-iron fluted Doric columns at each end which are supported on stone piers surmounted by vase finials. From the White Bridge the drive continues for c 240m, sweeping north and north-west to approach the carriage court to the north-east of the House.

A further drive entered the grounds at Exeter Lodge, situated some 650m north-north-east of the House and adjacent to Haydon Common. The north drive sweeps south-east, south and south-west through North Covert and parkland north of the House, to reach the carriage court north-east of the House. The north drive is no longer in use (1999). A late C18 south drive, now (1999) a track, enters the estate at Pier Lodge (listed grade II), a mid C19 stuccoed cottage of identical design to the Kenton Lodge, which stands on the north side of the B3381 road c 1.1km south of the House and immediately opposite the principal entrance to Mamhead Park. The south drive connects with the ride round the eastern perimeter of the deer park, passing along the south and west boundaries of Mamhead Big Wood to join the east drive immediately south of the White Bridge. To the south-west, a private road runs from Oxton House to North Kenwood, passing through a gateway with early C19 piers and gates (listed grade II) which match the Greek Revival ornamental details of the White Bridge. The gate piers have been reconstructed in the late C20.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Oxton House (listed grade II) was built by the Rev John Swete between 1781 and 1791, replacing a C16 manor house on the same site. Swete's house was a plain, two-storey stuccoed building with two canted bay windows on the east facade. The House was altered c 1830 when Greek Revival details including the single-storey Doric portico on the east facade and a further portico on the south or garden facade (removed, late C20) were added. Further alterations were made in the late C20, principally to the interior of the House, when it was divided into apartments. The stable block lies to the north of the House and has the remains of a pediment and round-headed recess on its east facade. It was also converted to domestic use in the late C20.

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GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS An area of formal gardens lies to the west of the House, with lawns and informal pleasure grounds to the south, east and north. The formal garden west of the House comprises a rectangular level lawn formerly divided into six square and rectangular flower beds with a conservatory or orangery to the north. The formal garden was established by 1888 (OS 1st edition), and today (1999) remains a flower garden, with a rockery and other ornamental planting. To the south and east of the House level lawns are separated from the park by a grass bank, while to the north of the House a series of serpentine walks lead through wooded pleasure grounds towards the walled garden and Home Farm. In the late C18 the Rev Swete cleared away the walled enclosures, terrace, yew topiary pyramids and orchards which enclosed the old house, to reveal the valley to the south-east. The woodland south-east of the House was also developed by Swete with a series of picturesque walks and buildings.

A walk ascends from near Kenton Lodge into Mamhead Big Wood. Following a serpentine course in a southerly direction, the walk passes a late C18 summerhouse constructed by Swete. Now (1999) in a state of disrepair, Swete's watercolour shows this structure with a thatched conical roof. Some 800m south-east of the House the walk reaches the Cottage (listed grade II, also known as 'Maraylya' and 'Mamhead Cottage'), a picturesque rustic retreat designed by Swete in 1792 for the display of some of his watercolours. The Cottage was described and illustrated in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1793) which showed a two-storey structure with gothic windows and other details, a peaked thatched roof and an external staircase leading to an open arcade on the upper west facade. Swete placed an inscription over the door: 'Sibi et fuis amicis IS 1792 Hic licet incertibus horis ducere follicitae jucunda oblivia vitae' [To me and my friends it is lawful here to spend an idle hour pleasantly and in oblivion of life's little annoyance] (*Gentleman's Mag* 1793). The building was much altered in the 1970s.

PARK Some 130m south of the House, beyond the lawns, the ground falls sharply to a stream which runs from south-west to north-east across the park. In the late C18 Swete dammed this stream to form a series of cascades, weirs and long narrow ponds which flow from a large pool c 350m south-west of the House to a small lake west of Kenton Lodge, c 320m east-north-east of the House. To the south of the stream and pools the land rises to a belt of woodland adjacent to the public road which forms the southern boundary of the site. This area, bordered to the east by Mamhead Big Wood on a west- and north-west-facing slope, and by woodland known as Sixteen Acres to the west, forms the deer park. The park was not marked on Donn's Map of Devon (1765), and appears to have formed part of the Rev Swete's late C18 improvements to the estate.

KITCHEN GARDEN Lying c 80m west of the House, the kitchen garden is approximately rectangular on plan and is enclosed by walls with the gardener's cottage standing outside the garden to the north-east. The late C19 and early C20 OS maps show two parallel ranges of glasshouses in the northern half of the garden. A further walled garden is located c 100m north-north-west of the House, adjacent to the Home Farm. This was also established by the late C19, as was an extensive area of orchard to the west and south-west of Home Farm and to the west of the principal kitchen garden (outside the area here registered).

REFERENCES

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Maps B Donn, *Map of the County of Devon*, 1765 Tithe map for Kenton parish, 1840 (Devon Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1888, published 1890 2nd edition revised 1904, published 1906 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1888, published 1890 2nd edition revised 1904, published 1905

Illustrations Rev John Swete, watercolour views of Oxtton House and grounds, 1788-95 (564M, F; Z19/2/12), (Devon Record Office)

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Archival items Diaries kept by the Rev John Swete, late C18 (564M F2, F5, F6 and F8), (Devon Record Office) Photocopy of illustrated manuscript volume by the Rev John Swete 'Picturesque description of the grounds of Oxton', 1801 (4158M, Swete, F1), (Devon Record Office) Letters and accounts, 1772-1848, including sale particulars for Oxton, 1848 (337 addb/MF3), (Devon Record Office) F W L Stockdale, MS History of Devon, early C19 (Devon and Exeter Institution) Sale particulars: 1924, 1939, 1944, 1982 (Devon Record Office)

Description written: August 1999 Amended: October 1999 Register Inspector: JML Edited: July 2000

This list entry was subject to a Minor Amendment on 14/12/2011

Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.